

Book Reviews

MEDICINE RIVER

Thomas King. Markham, Ontario: Penguin Group, 1991.

by *Marybeth Westman*

There are many reasons for writing a book. A book is written for entertainment, for information, for instruction, for a push for change and for dealing with issues. The book *Medicine River*, by Thomas King, is about Native Indian people being removed from their culture by outside social agents and groups; but they will eventually return.

Native people like Will were removed from their cultures but they will one day return to their elders, to their land, and to their traditional religion. Native Indians have been removed from their cultures by the white missionaries. In the Yukon, for instance, when the missionaries first arrived, they admitted that they wanted to change the thoughts and actions of the Indians. They did not believe that the Indian people had their own religion and the Indian people soon had to give up their traditional religion for Christianity, for example. Throughout the nineteenth century both the Catholic and Anglican churches sent out missionaries. There have also been Russian Orthodox in Alaska since 1834. The missionaries' purpose was to change the Indian people. The first Anglican missionary arrived in the Yukon in 1861 and many like Robert McDonald set up missions. McDonald translated parts of the bible and prayers into the Loucheux language. The Indians learned to read and write Loucheux and eventually became ministers. The missionaries brought "...European religion, ...education, ... and European ideas." (McClellan 1987:78).

Schools were soon constructed like the one founded by Bishop Bompas in Carcross. In 1906, after Bishop Bompas' death, the school was turned into a residential school. Many Indians attended before it was shut down in the 1950s (McClellan 1987). These mission schools removed Indian children from their homes and attempted to change their beliefs and values. The children were beaten if they spoke their traditional Indian language and in some cases were forbidden to have contact with other family members. The white religion and mission schools made the Indian people feel like their culture was something to be ashamed of and as a result, most of the mission school children turned to alcohol in later years.

Many Native people today are confused when it comes to the issue of the missionaries' religion and do not really consider themselves as members. They are returning to their traditional sweats, sundances, and meditations. In the book *Medicine River*, Will is not a very religious man. He is also in the transition between the European and Native Indian religion.

The Canadian government also removed the Native Indian people from their culture. They believed that the Indian people were an insignificant group that needed to be taken care of and so the government created the Department of Indian Affairs to do just that. This department tried to define who was and who was not legally Indian. The government encouraged "enfranchisement" (McClellan 1987). The Indian person was then allowed to vote, buy alcohol, join armed forces, get a business license, and send his or her children to public schools. An Indian woman was automatically "enfranchised" and lost her status after she married a white man.

Will's mother had to leave the reserve when she married a white man

and even after they separated, she could not return to her reserve and Indian way of life. It was only in 1982 that it became the band's responsibility to decide whether a woman was status or nonstatus (McClellan 1987).

The government also wanted to 'civilize' the Indian people and so they were put on reserves with an elected chief and council. This kind of government was not like the Indian tradition and the Federal government in Ottawa became in charge of the Indians (McClellan 1987). Will's people lived on a reserve outside of Medicine River. Even though Will lived in Toronto he chose to return to his home land and be with his people. Will took what the city had to offer and later used his knowledge to help his people. In Larry Krotz's book a young Indian man says that:

The Indian is ahead of the white people in that he has to understand that he has two sets of values. He has to understand that one set is for life on the reservation and the other is for life here in the city. The Indians need those two sets of values (37).

While in the city, Will learned the art of photography and later he set up a shop in Medicine River. The values that Will held are different in Medicine River and in Toronto.

The first step for the Native Indian to return to his or her culture is to return to the land. By leaving the city and going to Medicine River, Will demonstrates a determination needed in order to become familiar with the Indian culture.

The next step for the person is to return to the elders for guidance and advice. When Will and Harlen visit the marriage doctor Martha Oldcrow, Will believes that he is just getting a present for the baby, South Wing.

However, the real reason for the visit is for advice on Will and Louis' love relationship. By moving to Medicine River, Will is able to associate with elders like Martha Oldcrow and the storytelling elder. Will learns from these elders and is then able to lead a more fulfilling life. He remembers Martha Oldcrow's words about two people caring for each other and goes on to develop a serious relationship with Louis.

The last step for the person is to return to the traditional religion. The Indian religion requires that people live the good life and respect others as well as animals. The person must understand nature and the spirits of the trees and lakes. He or she must be able to get along with these spirits. Also according to the religion, there are certain ways to heal the sick (McClelland 1987).

Will is also finding his way back to the traditional Indian religion. He is a funny, a kind, and a gentle man. He

is finally finding a place in life, at Medicine River. He owns a photography shop, participates in community sports, and is building a family with Louis Heavyman and her daughter South Wing. The last sentence in the book indicates Will's desire to return to the spiritual beliefs of his culture and to nature. He says: "I could see that the winter sun was out now and lying low over Medicine River. Later that afternoon I went for a long walk in the snow."

In conclusion, *Medicine River* portrays a subtle approach to the issue of the Native Indian people being dominated by white society, being culturally repressed and forbidden self-expression. The examples that were used from the Yukon represent all the other areas occupied by Indian people in Canada. Despite the cultural transition the white society has imposed, Native Indian people are slowly tracing their roots back to their land, to their elders, and to their religion.

References

- Krotz, Larry. *Urban Indians: The Strangers In Canada's Cities*. Edmonton Alberta: Hurting Publishers Ltd., 1980.
- McClelland, Catherine. *A History of Yukon Indians—Part of the Land, Part of the Water*. Vancouver, British Columbia: Douglas and McIntyre Ltd., 1987.

FEMINISM AND THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

Sneja Gunew and Anna Yeatman, eds. *St. Leonards, NSW, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1993* (Canadian Distributors: Fernwood Press, Halifax).

by Shirin Kudchedkar

The politics of difference are explored in a variety of ways in this wide-ranging set of studies. While difference has been seen as stigma (by marginalized groups) or as threat (by dominant groups) it needs rather to be seen as plenitude. The studies focus by and large on Australia and on Canada and distinguish between the multicultural composition of these nations on the one hand and the multicultural policies of the state on the other. For Sneja Gunew multicultural writing is an expression of a multicultural reality, a manifestation of the desire of groups of varied ancestries—immigrant as well as Native—to preserve their own cultures and celebrate their differences rather than eliminate them in the interests of an "Australian tradition." For Efi Hatzimanolis the state policy of multiculturalism is an intervention in unequal relations of power. She quotes Bhikhu Parekh's warning, "Liberalism has always remained



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